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## Notes and Opinions.

### A CHRONOLOGICAL DISCUSSION OF THE VIRGIN ORACLE OF ISAIAH.

By THE REV. THEO. G. SOARES, PH.D.  
Rockford, Ill.

In the present state of the chronology of the eighth century B.C., it is perhaps not very safe to rest any important theory upon a date. The termini of the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah are so difficult to determine that even a discussion of the possibilities is not in general very profitable. In the case of the interesting virgin prophecy of Isaiah, however, it seems possible that a natural and satisfactory interpretation is discarded, because of the universal acceptance of what is, at least, a very doubtful date. Nearly every commentator has his own theory of the meaning of the virgin and of the child. But they all come together on the one point, that the old Jewish view, which made Hezekiah the predicted child, is a chronological impossibility. Perhaps the following four views at present hold the field :

1. The virgin was Isaiah's own wife. His first wife, the mother of Shear-jashub, must have died, and the prophet must have married a maiden. She was to bear him a child, who, like all Isaiah's children, should receive a symbolic name, and stand as a sign to the people. This view is very commonly held. But its assumptions are many, and arbitrary. It is quite improper that the son of the prophet should be Immanuel, the child of promise, and evidently prince of the land (*cf.* Isa. 8:8). And when we seek the connection which should exist between Immanuel and the Wonderful Child of Isa. 9, the impossibility of this theory is manifest.

2. Nägelsbach's view, made popular through the Lange Commentary, is that the prophecy takes the form of a denunciation of an unmarried daughter of Ahaz, whose disgrace is to be a sign to the royal house. This theory seems to have little beyond its ingenuity to commend it.

3. Orelli forcibly presents the view that the child is the offspring of the church. This may answer for the larger meaning of the prophecy, but it deprives it of all local color and historical significance.

4. Somewhat akin to the preceding is the theory that the prophet has an ideal child in mind. In the passage under consideration the promised birth simply designates poetically the lapse of time before the overthrow of the Syro-Ephraimitish alliance. In the following chapter the child is before the mind of the prophet as the ideal prince of the land, who shall come after the

destruction, but who is already seen prophetically as the reigning prince. In the ninth chapter the child is actually expected as the Deliverer, and the ideal takes the form of a definite contrast with Tiglath-pileser III., giving rise to the striking expressions "Wonderful Counsellor," etc.

How colorless and far-fetched do all these theories seem in contrast with the view that Isaiah is speaking of Hezekiah. If we can waive the chronological difficulty for a moment, we are instantly struck with the appropriateness of this interpretation; and we then understand how, conformably with Messianic prophecy in general, this virgin oracle of Isaiah has its natural primary and historical meaning, and afterwards and transcendently its higher Christian and spiritual meaning.

Ahaz, let it be granted, a young prince of twenty years of age, has just taken to himself a wife. She stands beside him when he hypocritically refuses to ask Jehovah for a sign. Then the prophet speaks those words of scathing rebuke: "Hear ye now, O house of David; is it a small thing for you to weary men, that you will weary my God also? therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold the young wife is with child, and she shall bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel," etc. That is to say: "In thine own house, O Ahaz, shall be the sign, and before this thy son, the son of thy hopes, shall reach years of discretion, thine enemies shall be destroyed. But more than that, this son of thine shall see thine own land desolate; for the judgment of the Lord is speedy."

[I adopt here the theory that the Hebrew word *almah* may refer to a young married woman. But if an unmarried maiden must be understood, it is still equally possible that Ahaz was not yet married, but only betrothed, and the prophecy of the conception will then be future. The point is immaterial here, but the former seems to yield the more natural sense.]

Evidently there is wrapped up a promise in the prophecy, even though the sign to Ahaz is given in anger. And the promise lies in the name Immanuel (God with us). This promise has a primary fulfilment in the godly Hezekiah; and since its ultimate fulfilment is to be in the Christ, what can be more appropriate than that the typical child should be of the House of David, in the Messianic line? Then, as in Pss. 2, 45, 72, etc., we have simply a Davidite before the prophet's eyes, representing the greater son of David, who shall be the ideal "Messiah of Jehovah."

If the child of chapter seven be Hezekiah, then can we understand how the prophet, in the next chapter can declare that the destruction is coming "on thy land O Immanuel"—utterly inexplicable if Immanuel be not a prince of the royal house. And in the ninth chapter, the noble prophecy of the child who shall be the Wonder of a Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, follows the former prophecies in natural order, and forms a legitimate climax to the idealization of the expected Redeemer.

Probably all this would be readily admitted by any biblical student. But

what need to dwell upon the appropriateness of the application of the virgin oracle to Hezekiah if that prince was already nine years old at the time of its utterance! Thus chronology bars the way to a satisfactory exegesis. It is reasonable then to examine the chronology, and see if it be so conclusive after all. There are the following chronological indications in the Second Book of Kings.

1. Ahaz succeeded in the 17th year of Pekah (16:1).
2. Ahaz was 20 years old: he reigned 16 years (16:2).
3. Hoshea succeeded in the 12th year of Ahaz (17:1).
4. Samaria taken in 9th year of Hoshea (17:6).
5. Hezekiah succeeded in the 3d year of Hoshea (18:1).
6. Hezekiah was 25 years old: he reigned 29 years (18:2).
7. The 4th year of Hezekiah was the 7th year of Hoshea (18:9).
8. The 6th year of Hezekiah was the 9th year of Hoshea (18:10).
9. Sennacherib invasion in the 14th year of Hezekiah (18:13).

However jealous we may be of the accuracy of the biblical historians, we cannot of course deny the obvious fact that there exist chronological inaccuracies, be they scribal or otherwise. In the first place then, as has often been pointed out, these dates are not self-consistent. Ahaz died at the age of 36, leaving a son of 25 years of age—a manifest impossibility. Ahaz came to the throne three years before the death of Pekah, so Hoshea must have become king of Israel in the 4th year, and not in the 12th year of Ahaz. The hypothetical eight years interregnum of the older chronologists is of course impossible in the light of the Assyrian dates. We know Pekah was slain after the fall of Damascus in 732.

Again, while all these dates seem very definite, it is certain that very few of them belong to the original chronicles of the two kingdoms; and they are, for the most part, the result of synchronistic calculations by the compiler of our book of Kings (or what amounts to the same thing the compiler of the preceding redaction of the dual histories). Thus a single error would vitiate all succeeding dates. It is manifest that the references numbered 5, 7, 8, all depend upon the two original statements that Ahaz reigned 16 years, and that Hoshea succeeded in Ahaz's 12th year. As indicated, the latter statement must be incorrect; the former may, or may not be.

Bringing these statements in Kings into comparison with the Assyrian chronology, there appear at once two fixed termini. Ahaz's tribute to Tiglath-pileser was paid in 734 B. C., and this cannot have occurred long after his accession to the throne. Sennacherib's campaign against Hezekiah was in 701 B. C. There is thus 33 years, where the biblical writer allows only 30 (Ahaz 16 and Hezekiah 14).

Many scholars would accept 715 B. C. as the year of Hezekiah's accession. And it certainly affords, on the whole, a very satisfactory solution of the difficulties. It is based on the very reliable statement of 2 Kings 18:13 (Isa. 36:1), doubtless excerpted from the royal annals. It makes the trifling cor-

rection that Ahaz reigned 19 or 20 years, instead of 16, and by scribal error Jotham's 16 years might easily have been repeated for Ahaz. It suggests a plausible explanation for the error noted in No. 3 above. Hoshea did not become king in Ahaz's 12th year, but Samaria was captured, and Hoshea's reign ended in that year. And moreover this date puts the accession of Hezekiah after the fall of Samaria, and thus explains the references of 2 Chron. 30:6, 31:1 (which must have an historical basis), where the absence of a king of Israel in the first year of Hezekiah is clearly presupposed.

There must be admitted a difficulty in No. 6. Upon the theory that Hezekiah was born in 734, he would be 20, and not 25, at his accession. But when it is remembered how easily such errors occur in the transmission of MSS., the difficulty will not seem insuperable.

Thus with regard to the nine chronological statements noted above, we have accepted the 1st, 4th and 9th. We have corrected the 3d, which is demonstrably wrong. We have eliminated the 5th, 7th and 8th, which are simply corollaries from the 3d. We have necessarily lengthened Ahaz's reign to 20 years, in order to bring its close within 14 years of the Sennacherib invasion. And the only actual hypothesis is the change of Hezekiah's age from 25 to 20. In the face of this easy escape from the chronological difficulty, why may we not assign to the virgin prophecy of Isaiah the significance, which seemed so natural, that the Jewish rabbis proposed it as a matter of course.

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[The same conclusion has been reached on slightly different grounds, by Professor Charles Rufus Brown, D.D., in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* for 1890.—ED.]